

2006

# The Space of Freedom

Joseph C. Troncale

*University of Richmond*, [jtroncal@richmond.edu](mailto:jtroncal@richmond.edu)Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/mlc-faculty-publications>Part of the [Interactive Arts Commons](#), and the [Slavic Languages and Societies Commons](#)

## Recommended Citation

Troncale, Joseph C. "The Space of Freedom." In *The Space of Freedom: Apartment Exhibitions in Leningrad, 1964-1986*. Richmond, Virginia: Joel and Lila Harnett Museum of Art, University of Richmond Museums, 2006.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Languages, Literatures, and Cultures at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Languages, Literatures, and Cultures Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact [scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu](mailto:scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu).

## ПРОСТРАНСТВО СВОБОДЫ THE SPACE OF FREEDOM

*The future historian of our otherworldly art will undoubtedly face an impossible task if he or she wishes to penetrate deeply into the psychology of our time, into the compelling motives of the artists to create, and of the viewers to see what was done by these artists. They will come face to face with the astonishing phenomenon of our time that bears the name “apartment exhibitions.”... A strange exhibition set up, as a rule, in some dingy apartment to be found at the end of dead-end lanes and dark courtyards after tripping over slippery staircases and piles of garbage. ■ It was worth every moment to see an exhibition in this dilapidated room when the lights go out for a while, and not a one of the many visitors heads for the exit, but, instead, they begin striking matches — the dancing, miniscule flames light up fragments of the paintings. The canvases immediately take on a marvelous multi-dimensional spatial quality — something that just couldn’t have happened at even the most outlandish official exhibition!’*

The exhibition *The Space of Freedom: Apartment Exhibitions in Leningrad, 1964-1986* invites visitors directly into the carefully re-created interior of a Soviet communal apartment. Within the kind of environment where the paintings first breathed freely, visitors have the opportunity to experience works by unofficial artists of the Soviet era who boldly



IMAGE FROM AN  
APARTMENT EXHIBITION,  
DATE AND IDENTITY  
OF SUBJECTS UNKNOWN.

executed and exhibited art that did not conform to the ideological prescriptions of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. These artists had to substitute the private space of their apartments for the public space controlled and denied them by the Party. Planning and staging these exhibitions, the artists defied the cultural impositions of an authoritarian regime that

repeatedly demonstrated its resolve to suppress them.

Out of a compelling need and consuming desire to survive, these artists had to organize themselves not only to exhibit their work, but also to promulgate and perpetuate it as a second culture deserving to exist in its own right. Apartment exhibitions provided a space for unsanctioned artists to come together physically as a community. In that space they inspired each other to continue to learn, to create freely, and to boldly assert their right to do so. From the 1950s through the 1980s the private space of the communal apartment became a primary space for personal and group salon-style exhibitions, installations and performance art, for serious discussions about the social and artistic concerns of outlawed artists, for poetry readings and for “happenings” in general, as they were known in the 60s. The salon-style exhibitions in the apartments are reminiscent of the 1860s *Salon des Refusés* in France. Artists also used these occasions to devour rare copies of such new official Soviet publications as *Abstractionism: The Demise of Civilization* replete with high quality color illustrations of what was a decadent Western substitute for true art.

The University of Richmond Museums’ *The Space of Freedom* illustrates the Leningrad apartment exhibitions as a phenomenon of historical and artistic significance. These exhibitions were literally a staging ground for the birth and development of a new culture of art in Russia and throughout the Soviet Union during the period 1964-1986. The paintings in the exhibition represent the choice of a generation of artists to stay “at home,” both in their own country and in the space of their own apartments, rather than to emigrate. They are the product of

the artists’ commitment to create a new culture from the inside out rather than from the outside in. By staying in Russia and explicitly asserting their creative impulse, the artists had, in their own words, “migrated” to a new homeland where bureaucracy and ideology could not touch them.

In her essay on the unofficial art of Leningrad Tatiana Shekhter emphasizes the lack of a definition or concise term for the art created during this period, which is still too recent to fully examine from a historical perspective. She argues that the term unofficial does not suit the situation entirely because its use assumes a democratic context in which the merits of the art are debated and arrived at by the public and by critics in an open forum. As it wrestled with the restrictions of official art and, by its mere production, contravened the tenets of that art, it was referred to as nonconformist art in the West. This name sits uneasily with historians because it resulted more from the point of view of official Soviet mainstream culture rather than from a description of the essential nature of the art or of the intention of the unofficial artists themselves.

As heirs of the Russian avant-garde of the 1910s and the 1920s, the artists and the work they produced are also referred to as the Russian “post-avant-garde.” Existing concurrently with the mainstream Soviet culture yet lacking official validation, this artistic movement had to survive without the support mechanisms enjoyed by the mainstream culture. To survive and create, these artists organized themselves professionally, privately exhibited their art to engage the public, promulgated their ideas and documented their own existence, and prepared a new generation of artists to develop and continue their culture into the future. From this perspective, the movement can be referred to as a “second culture.”<sup>2</sup>



The art in *The Space of Freedom* represents only a fragment of the unofficial or “second culture” that became an important feature of painting during the Soviet period of Russian history. The apartment exhibitions in Leningrad and in Moscow played a significant role in



PHOTOGRAPH FROM THE 1991 FILMING OF THE MOVIE “BROKEN LIGHT,” BY V. GLAGOLEVA, IN WHICH THE APARTMENT EXHIBITION “ON BRONNITSKAYA STREET” WAS REENACTED IN A DIFFERENT APARTMENT (#2 AT 10 PUSHKIN STREET). FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: TATIANA BARANOVA AND THE ARTISTS OF THE ASSOCIATION OF EXPERIMENTAL FINE ARTS (TEII): EVGENY ORLOV, LUCIEN DOLINSKY, YULY RYBAKOV, AND VADIM VOINOV. (PHOTO FROM THE ARCHIVE OF SERGEI SERGEEV)

reconnecting painting of the second half of the twentieth century in the Soviet Union with that of its first two decades, particularly with the Russian avant-garde and other experimental art of the early Soviet period.

From Arefiev and Shvarts to Kovalsky and Orlov, from the Order of Destitute Painters (1956) to the Association of Experimental Fine Arts (1981), the artists in this exhibition represent the broad spectrum of creativity that constitutes the legacy of nonconformist art in the Soviet Union. Nonetheless, the paintings have at least one thing in common: they all existed in the marginal space of illegality and as such were apparently only

tangential to mainstream Soviet culture. However, it must be noted that when creating these works the authors were impervious to the term “illegality” and, ironically, the works themselves were quite possibly one of the few points of contact with an uncompromised culture that art during the Soviet period may be able to claim.

Much as the Russian Orthodox churches were the “sanctuary” of meaning associated with icons, the communal apartment became such a “sanctuary” for nonconformist artists and their work. Installing nonconformist art in a museum is similar to displaying icons in a museum because the institutional setting diminishes the art’s critical content. *The Space of Freedom* is set in a re-created room of a communal apartment as an attempt to restore the context in which the paintings were created, exhibited, and discussed. In addition, the re-creation of a communal apartment in an American museum gives a visual representation of part of the enigmatic process of socialization and of economic life during the Soviet period that was integral to the birth and development of nonconformist art.

The four close, humble walls that formed the individual living space within the *kommunalka* or the communal apartment were the bastions of this forbidden and forgotten heritage of an entire culture.<sup>3</sup> For all of the seeming deprivation they represented, they were the workshops of a nation of artists whose determination to create freely widened those four walls to infinity. Beyond those walls, past the kitchen stove and the common toilet, beyond the suspicion and betrayal, beyond the shouting and drunkenness, these artists reached out of their time and space and connected with a generation of their predecessors long silenced behind the veil of ideological edicts on art.

To the Soviet citizen, the *kommunalka* was both

a “space of freedom” and “a space of involuntary confinement.” As the latter, the *kommunalka* is a rather public space, as Boris Groys writes, where the inviolability of one’s person was neutralized. Anyone could use or manipulate whatever form of communication the living of one’s life in such common space yielded against anyone else. The inhabitants speak, are listened to, and overheard whether they are uttering hope or despair, love or hate. In this common space, one loses control of practically all communication about oneself. It enters a public domain to be used to define an individual as one’s neighbors determine.<sup>4</sup> His humor and irony notwithstanding, Yury Kabakov’s 1990s installation, “*Kommunalka*,” illustrates the communal apartment as a definition of painful psychological and physical human extremes.

Exhibiting their paintings together, collectively, in communal apartments, the artists altered the nature of the space they lived in. *The Space of Freedom* recalls and dramatizes the reconfiguration of the communal apartment not as a space of confinement, but as it became a space of freedom in the hands of free creative artists who exhibited there. Whether consciously or subconsciously, those artists transformed that space of exposure and isolation into one of transparency and unity. The exhibitions became a venue to see and discuss each other’s work, enjoy the camaraderie and encouragement of their peers, and plan their future.

In some respects unofficial artists, or, perhaps even more accurately here, the artists of the second culture were “homeless” except for the home they created collectively in those apartments. That “home” was a form of consciousness predicated on the integrity of the creative personality as discovered by the individual and on the free play of the creative impulse as exercised by the artist. They had to discover this consciousness

as a mooring to a reality that the sterile world of Soviet ideology denied them. In a hostile atmosphere that forbade the open expression of individual and independent creative vision, culture had to continue to advance, to push the envelope to connect with that reality, with that truth in whatever form it found necessary to assume. Given such an environment, it is not



IMAGE FROM AN APARTMENT EXHIBITION, DATE AND IDENTITY OF SUBJECTS UNKNOWN.

surprising that from time to time suspicions of the presence of KGB stoolpigeons hung heavily above some of the apartment exhibitions.

The cataclysmic changes in Bolshevik Russia dramatically affected the direction of Russian art from 1917 to the present. In 1918 Lenin declared Moscow the administrative center of Soviet political, economic, and social power. After 206 years as the capital of Russia, St. Petersburg was forced to bow out of the political and cultural limelight for which she was born and regally outfitted. In the new Soviet ideological climate, the culture of St. Petersburg that had developed in close company with the great cultures of the world since its birth, became isolated and was forced to submit to Moscow’s control.



After a 1932 decree abolishing all revolutionary artistic groups, the Party moved to impose uniformity in artistic production; art was to be “engineered.” In 1934, after consultation with members of the artistic community, the Soviet cultural establishment adopted Socialist Realism as the official party line according to which all forms of creative expression would be directed to best serve the building of socialism. All artistic production was polarized: official art bore the Party’s ideological approval and unofficial art did not and suffered the consequences.

The criteria for the creation of any work of art whether it be painting, film, poetry, prose, sculpture, theatre, cinema, or music, were *narodnost’*, *partiinnost’*, *klassovost’*, and *ideinost’*. *Narodnost’* (literally translated as “people-ness” or populist) is the quality of being accessible to the people and reflecting the essential characteristics and interests of the peoples of the Soviet Union without partiality for any ethnic group. *Partiinost’* (“party-ness”) is the quality of being imbued with loyalty, dedication, service, and sensitivity to the Party as the leader of the masses on the road to socialism. *Klassovost’* (“class-ness”) reflects the understanding of the history and principles of class warfare and the struggle to eliminate bourgeois individualism in favor of social collectivism. *Ideinost’* (“idea-ness”) demands that any work of art must be steeped in the fundamental ideology of the Party as it guides the Soviet Union to its revolutionary future.

After Stalin’s death in 1953 and Khrushchev’s denunciation of his “excesses” at the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party in 1956, the arts enjoyed a period of euphoria that was cut short by harsh reminders that the hard times were not yet over. It soon became clear that there was still no tolerance of creativity that pursued aims

other than those of an already bankrupt Marxist-Leninist ideology. The Party controlled everything through the government. Every theatre, every museum, every newspaper, every television and radio station, and every film studio — all had both a Party and a government apparatus as part of the directorate for the proper ideological use of those outlets of culture, education, and information.

There was no commercial art world, there were no private galleries — nothing was private, at least as far as the Party knew. Artists working outside the parameters of that ideology were, at best, ignored, or, at worst, suppressed. The Union of Soviet Artists controlled all exhibition spaces, which essentially belonged to the government since it held and controlled all assets within the country.

Some artists avoided membership in the Union of Artists as a matter of principle since the Party used it to co-opt the creativity of its members by promising them highly prized perks in return for submission. When artistic work was deemed ideologically inappropriate, the Party denied permission to publicly exhibit that work and excluded the artists from the extremely privileged world of government commissions.

The official response to the unofficial artists’ request to create their own independent professional educational structures and artistic organizations was that they had many opportunities within the system of *samodeyatelnost’* to pursue their artistic interests just like other Soviet citizens. This meant that they were free to join their comrades in any one of the many amateur groups to take up painting in their spare time from their normal eight-hour-a-day workweek. Without diplomas from official state art institutes, however, they had no right either to behave as professional artists or to exhibit or sell their work

to the public. If they pursued a career only as a professional artist without the proper official documents, the Party considered them parasites and, as such, criminals.

Even their own self-obsession with being followed by government agents began to hound unofficial artists. Like Fanon's native, nonconformist artists in the Soviet Union existed in a nervous condition because of the constant threat to their culture. The nervous energy from such a precipitous existence became a catalyst for them to create and sustain a remarkable new culture. As Solzhenitsyn wrote of his heroes in the world of the GULAG, unofficial artists became human beings in the white heat of this "condition." Oddly enough, many of the artists who experienced this now often find themselves at a loss without its stimulus and are nostalgic for it.

Denied public expression and demonstration of their creativity, the ever resourceful and resilient artists began exhibiting in their own apartments in 1964. Similarly, banned musicians performed "apartment concerts" and illegal troupes of actors gave "apartment plays." The point of their efforts was not necessarily to oppose the system; they were simply creative artists who presumed that they had the right to express themselves and to demonstrate their creativity in whatever form that might take.

There were great risks in presuming they were free to create. The Party defined the exercise of this freedom as defiance, and, thus, as illegal. From the artists' perspective, the creation of a nonconformist art was not necessarily intentional; the majority of the artists were apolitical. Nonconformist art was defined as political from the point of view of the Party's collective paranoid imagination. Many of the artists would agree that, ironically, the Party's dogged and cruel attempts



ALEKSANDR AREFIEV (LEFT) AND NIKOLAI LYUBUSHKIN (RIGHT) AT AN EXHIBITION OF TWENTY ARTISTS THAT WAS SPONTANEOUSLY ORGANIZED IN 1976 AT EUREKA, A CLUB INSIDE A STUDENT DORMITORY. PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN.

to eradicate non-sanctioned art and to punish its creators became a primary contributing factor in the creation of the nonconformist movement. In fact, in many instances, the government's disapproval of literary or artistic works was often considered a reliable indication that they must have had significant aesthetic merit.

The demand for adherence to the criteria of Socialist Realism was unequivocal. In the second half of the 1930s, the punishments for violation were draconian. The Party decimated the nation's creative genius and erased the names of an entire generation of creative artists by exile, imprisonment, or execution. During World War II, when the USSR was in a life and death struggle against an outside fascist enemy, there was a brief reprieve for alleged internal enemies of the state. However, with Hitler's defeat, the Party stepped up its efforts to control those enemies and to keep out the effects of so-called decadent bourgeois and cosmopolitan Western influences.

One of the earliest groups of nonconformists in postwar-Leningrad was the Order of Impoverished



Painters (ONZh, later known as the Arefiev Circle) that included Aleksandr Arefiev, Rikhard Vasmi, Valentin Gromov, Vladimir Shagin, and Sholom Shvarts, and the poet Roald Mandelshtam, who provided inspiration for the group and a place for them to gather. Generally recognized as the fathers of the Leningrad underground, each of these artists is represented in *The Space of Freedom*. Innovative in form and content, their work was instantly recognized as problematic and threatening. Inspired by Cézanne's experiments in color and form, their work tended more toward the grotesque and often portrayed the abject moral and material poverty of everyday existence in the Soviet Union — a forbidden theme in any sense of the word.

Resisting official culture was a tremendous challenge, the mere undertaking of which contributed significantly to the stature and historical value of the second culture. Yury Novikov, a leading historian of the movement, writes:

*In the unofficial sphere, as nowhere else in our country, the development of art is left to its own laws in the purest form...There's just one difference today. Now the process is hamstrung by...social pressure that significantly distorts the immanent laws of the development of this art. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that the impulse to respond to the needs or pressures of society is a traditional aspect of Russian culture. That is what has given Russian culture its longevity and its stamina.*<sup>5</sup>

Unofficial artists lived as if they were part of a society that supported free expression. They believed, as Hegel did, that consciousness makes life rather than the other way around. By choosing to live and create freely, they were determined to

re-create their society. Vladislav Sukhorukov, a nonconformist, said that, "Immortality begins with consciousness and consciousness begins with artistic creativity." Eventually, their consciousness and their choice changed life in their country. It was their sense of the true nature of culture that made their efforts necessary and their eventual success certain. Mikhail Epstein writes of the kind of disposition such a commitment entails in the realm of culture:

*To live within society and to be free of it — this is what culture is about. It enters the blood and bone of society, in order to liberate individuals from the constraints of their social existence, from its repressive tendencies and historical limitations, much as spirit is not free from body, but represents a liberating force able to transcend external obstacles....*<sup>6</sup>

*The Space of Freedom* focuses on what these artists were doing in their own time as part of the development of art in all of time. In a sense, their work was simply a part of an inevitable and universal natural process. They were attempting to find a way to engage their own particular process and search for self-awareness and self-knowledge both as individuals and as artists, and to develop and apply an artistic form or systems of forms and approaches for the expression of both the process of their search and its results. The context of suppression in the Soviet Union simply complicated matters. The task of these artists was to reflect and represent public and private life in artistic form no matter the conditions of their time and space. Given the traditions they were born into, they were well equipped to undertake that task.

The conscious configuration and assertion



of their right to express their ideas in whatever form they chose is the legacy that unofficial artists left for all future generations of artists in Russia. They undertook the arduous and dangerous task of ensuring that culture would not be denied its process of perpetual renewal and growth. Paradoxically, the true significance of the underground may be that, as such a cultural force, it served the dominant culture as a source of innovation and renewal necessary organically for the mainstream Soviet culture to survive.<sup>7</sup>

Historians agree that through its process of self-evaluation and renewal this new form of culture moved art forward in the Soviet Union beyond the prescriptions of Socialist Realism and whatever the artists themselves or the Party could have even imagined. Unofficial artists assumed the responsibility of generating progress within their culture, creating what could be called an aesthetics of transition.<sup>8</sup> Scrupulously maintaining the integrity of their artistic vision, they, nonetheless, had to work in isolation from the rest of world. This isolation complicated the indispensable intersection of influence from other cultures with the discoveries they were making. On the other hand, unofficial artists themselves saw their predicament as analogous to that of cavemen beginning a new culture from scratch or to that of the ancient Greeks. In any case, they pride themselves on rejuvenating their culture and reconnecting it with those of the rest of the world.

Compared to the plight of oppressed writers during the Soviet era, the history of unofficial visual artists remains relatively unknown. Through the Western media, international attention to the plight of creative writers under the USSR amplified their voices. A single bulldozed exhibition, periodic beatings and

harassment were not enough to capture and hold the attention of the Western press as were the suppression, imprisonment or exile of a dissident writer in open defiance of the system. The artists' insistence on maintaining the integrity of their right to self-expression, not necessarily as a form of opposition but as a form of free expression of ideas, distinguished unofficial painters from writers such as Alexander Solzhenitsyn, whose work was openly critical of the Soviet regime. Solzhenitsyn and other dissident writers used their work to criticize and pummel the system; painters, in general, simply created as a naturally inherent right of self-expression without overtly dramatizing righteousness. While unofficial artists were hardly ever mentioned in the Soviet press, dissident writers and their works were regularly and vehemently denounced and, thus, had an instant audience, both at home and abroad. However, dissident writers and marginalized unofficial painters together were responsible for the process that led to the political and social changes of *perestroika* and *glasnost* begun in 1985 under Mikhail Gorbachev.

A phrase that repeatedly appears as the context of the discourse in Russian art history is *duxovnaja kul'tura* or "spiritual culture" as a specific product of the dynamics of all the phenomena of Russian culture. The phrase has an elasticity that accommodates practically anything that affects the evolution of the human spirit or soul. Characteristically, Russian cultural figures consciously accept a level of responsibility for the creation of this *duxovnaja kul'tura* by relating everything — even the very *byt* or daily grind of Russian existence — to the fundamental principle of being itself.

Today, unofficial Russian artists often speak of their compulsion to express the spiritual

dimension of human existence in their work. Russian Orthodoxy was, in general, the chief dynamic cultural force that gave birth to this compulsion in the visual arts. The second culture that seemed to appear spontaneously in the 1950s through the 1980s is part of a continuum begun in the first three decades of the twentieth century by the Russian avant-garde and the artist-cosmists who likewise inspired the later generation. In fact, recent histories of the movement go so far as to define the second culture as “an illegal institutionalization of the ideas and experiments in culture that have continued in Soviet art since the 1920s.”<sup>9</sup>

While living in the shadow of Socialist Realism, nonconformist artists were committed to preserving and keeping alive the process of discovering the beautiful rather than advertising a prefabricated and engineered ideology of beauty. It was a spiritual and conscious process. In the early 1920s Nicholas Roerich (1874-1947), a major figure in Russian cosmism, recast the well-worn adage attributed to Dostoevsky that “art will save the world” when he wrote “consciousness of beauty will save the world.” This “consciousness” was the subject, the substance, and the context of the process that artists engaged in creating a second culture in the Soviet Union.

Contemporary critical readings of the first generation of the Russian avant-garde of the second decade of the twentieth century and of the second culture of the 1960s and 1980s are often skeptical of this spiritual aspect expressed by those artists in their work as well in what they have said or written about their work. Beginning with Kandinsky, the avant-garde was deeply engaged in a process of creativity to which the dimension of spirituality, not necessarily in some mystical form, was ontologically fundamental to

their understanding and definition of the creative artist. For subsequent generations of the avant-garde this definition and understanding became the *sine qua non* of the artists’ lives. They did not merely see their world as matter, as Marx would have it, but as the manifestation of a higher reality to which they were accountable for their “vision” of the earthly reality. Dostoevsky codified that connection for the Russian artist when he wrote in *The Brothers Karamazov* (1881) of a “paradise on earth” that is the manifestation of the eternal verity in the passing show of earthly existence. From Dostoevsky’s perspective, a spiritual search cast by means of artistic endeavors has as its single goal the realization in real time and space of the truth discovered beyond the search, the transfiguration (*preobrazhenie*) of the “earthly reality.”

In the work of Malevich, Filonov, Goncharova, and Larionov during the second and third decades of the twentieth century, there is a pronounced disenchantment with the traditional views and conventions of form. This arose from their understanding that the forms of conditional existence that serve as the creative constructions to convey visions of a greater reality had either failed or betrayed humankind. Somehow the artistic conventional arrangements of the elements of form at their disposal no longer served the revelation and understanding of truth.

The Russian avant-garde attached a broad significance to their work. They based their creations on life-building principles, on the utopian idea of rebuilding reality by means of art. A distinctly unique sense of civil or social responsibility was part of the motivation for their spiritual search. Rarely did these artists remain solely within tame or purely aesthetic boundaries of art for art’s sake. Kandinsky’s and Malevich’s theories of the spiritual extended far beyond



the confines of visual art and directly addressed humanity, demanding spiritual growth. Their investigation into the spiritual dimension of art was to create a socially significant art with a spiritual dimension. In Russian culture this goal had become the unconditional internal tradition whose influence reached across all trends, styles, and different artistic concepts.<sup>10</sup>

By the beginning of the twentieth century Russian science and philosophy had in the form of Russian cosmism begun to formulate its own version of the creative transfiguration of existence by man in the image of the divine. Russian cosmism sees the universe as a union of all living beings in a single non-anthropocentric process of secular and spiritual evolution toward a higher state of consciousness with humanity actively moving it forward morally, physically, and psychically. A fusion of unwavering faith in the potential of humankind and the cosmos with a remarkably creative synthesis of empirical and abstract thought, Russian cosmism is an ultra-utopian dream of the perfection of humankind and of conditional existence altogether. It can be seen as part of the deep-seated impulse to Socialism and as germane to the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia.

As important as the link between the first generation of the Russian avant-garde and artists living and painting today in Russia is the link that can be traced back to a little known group of painters called "Amaravella" that formed in 1923. By 1927 the members of this group included Pyotr Petrovich Fateev, Boris Alekseevich Smirnov-Rusetsky, Vera Nikolaevna Pshesetskaya (Runa), Aleksandr Pavlovich Sardan, Sergei Ivanovich Shigolev, and Viktor Tikhonovich Chernovolenko.

Amaravella arose in the 1920s when the atmosphere was one of revolution rather than evolution. Suprematism, Futurism, and

Constructivism with their formal concerns and their geometrization of the language of painting dominated artistic expression in Russia. However, Amaravella sought to reveal the subtle, esoteric aspects of the cosmos in human form, in landscapes, and in the graphic depiction of abstract images of humankind's inner world or microcosmos. "In striving for this goal," the members of Amaravella declared in their manifesto of 1923, "the element of technical form is secondary, not claiming any totally independent significance. Therefore the perception of our paintings must follow not the path of a rational, formal analysis, but the path of feeling-intuition and of inner empathy..."<sup>11</sup>

Amaravella dedicated itself to developing a new aesthetic language to depict the immortality of the human soul, the infinity of the cosmos, and the relationship between them. Their work depicts the cosmos as an organism and projects a future of infinite promise. Under the influence of the writings of Nicholas and Elena Roerich, Amaravella created an art based on unity rather than fragmentation, and became a form of spiritual practice in the service of humanity. The group's goal was to expand human consciousness by developing a cosmic point of view. They sought to remove humankind's anthropomorphic, geocentric blinders, by penetrating the reality of the cosmos beyond the merely Euclidean and empirically verifiable, and to expand the potential of the senses through an understanding of psychic energies. This penetration to the other side (*v tu storonu*) through art necessitated the development as well of a new aesthetic of the beautiful that recognized the suspension of the restrictive parameters of conditional existence as the true purview of human consciousness. These ideas resonate powerfully with those of Dostoevsky, particularly in *The Brothers Karamazov* when Alyosha looks to the stars and is



attracted to “distant other worlds” that are beyond humanity’s preoccupation with its own geocentric traumas and dilemmas.

In the 1920s the artists of Amaravella, known also as artist-cosmists, shared the frame of mind that lead to broad experimentation and serious investigation across all disciplines into the rift existing between human beings and between humankind and the cosmos. It was apparent to leading cultural figures such as Scriabin, Kandinsky, Bely, Vernadsky, Feodorov, and Tsiolkovsky that some form of relationship and understanding had to be restored between humankind and the environment, God, ancient wisdom, the universe, and the cosmos, in general. Restoring their links to Amaravella and Roerich, unofficial artists continued the development and application of the worldview of Russian cosmism.

Understandably, the birth and development of a new culture demands to be perspicaciously chronicled and objectively evaluated within the context of other existing cultures. Unofficial art and unofficial artists engendered unofficial art history and art historians including Andreeva, Shekhter, Khlobystin, Basin, Skobkina, Rosenfeld, Rapoport, Kovalsky, Unksova, and Y. Novikov. The difficulty with the development of such a historical narrative has been that such a discourse was not permitted prior to 1985 and has developed publicly only since the beginning of *glasnost* and *perestroika*. Archived *samizdat* publications establish the historical context of the collective efforts devoted to the creation of a second culture. Some publications are collections of painstakingly created catalogues and peripheral materials for apartment exhibitions, brochures, and letters to and from Soviet officials as well as articles in personal archives about apartment exhibitions.<sup>12</sup>

A full and thorough objective evaluation of

unofficial art in the Soviet Union and its place in art history has yet to be made, due in part to the personalities of the artists from that era. These artists who founded the second culture are often portrayed as larger than life because of their tenacity in maintaining their integrity against overpowering odds. To some degree, such recognition is entirely appropriate; what they accomplished is heroic. However, in the past their legendary personas have prohibited impartial consideration of their work and many unofficial artists today admit that they knew they were not all Picassos or Cézannes.

Also contributing to the dearth of objective analysis is the fact that much of what was written about unofficial art revealed the individual taste of critics and those connoisseurs, usually foreign diplomats, who provided more of a compendium of who was “in” and who was “out” among the struggling artists of the underground than a critical perspective.

To complicate matters, the general public was ill equipped to understand or accept unofficial art. Those who did communicate publicly about the unofficial art focused on its literary and social aspects without addressing the context of the search for a new artistic identity through the exploration of the full spectrum of form and color. Consequently, Alex Rapoport wrote that “...artists who became the focus of the movement were often those whose work was understandable to ‘men of letters’ as illustrative pamphlets or on anecdotal levels, or as simple single-minded political satire. It was easier for them to write about the art from that perspective.”<sup>13</sup> The literariness of nineteenth-century Russian painting that was familiar to the Russian public and demanded and promulgated by Soviet Socialist Realism was a stumbling block to the reception of the innovative experimentation

that lies at the heart of unofficial art.<sup>14</sup>

In the history of any cultural movement there are milestones that reflect the dynamics of the process that leads to a fledgling movement's development and eventual institutionalization. The historical narratives of the trajectory of unofficial art from the late 1940s to 1986 agree on certain moments as turning points in the history of Russia's second culture. The more than one hundred apartment exhibitions from 1964 to 1986 form the bedrock of the movement in Leningrad. As Tatiana Shekhter writes,

*Each large apartment exhibition led to one or another turn in the life of the underground. By bringing artists together, these exhibitions synchronized creative energies, clarified the supporters and opponents of the movement, and attracted new participants into the ranks of nonconformists. Indeed, not every artist who said he was a nonconformist would risk falling into the sights of the KGB by hanging his works on the grungy wallpaper of a discarded apartment or in one of the rooms of an overcrowded communal apartment.*<sup>15</sup>

In addition to apartment exhibitions, exhibitions at Palaces of Culture were also critical moments for Leningrad's unofficial art. The second culture took its nickname, *Gazanevshchina*, from two such exhibitions in Leningrad held at the Gaz Palace of Culture in 1974 and the Nevsky Palace of Culture in 1975. These were the first exhibitions to be officially sanctioned in Leningrad, known for its rather obdurate cultural officials. Artists with many different styles came together for these exhibitions to celebrate the diversity of the underground movement. The exhibitions demonstrated the adrenalin rush that resulted

from and powered the search for individual expression and creative freedom. The impact of these two exhibitions in terms of validating and promoting nonconformist art in Leningrad overrode the uneven quality of the art exhibited.

Official approval for these exhibitions of unofficial art was due in part to the recent international outcry at the KGB's brutality during an open-air exhibition in Moscow in 1974. At the "Bulldozer Exhibition," as it was subsequently known, the KGB's hired thugs physically assaulted the artists and destroyed their paintings with bulldozers.

Sources estimate that the combined attendance at the two Leningrad exhibitions exceeded ten thousand over several days. Fifty-two unofficial artists participated in the exhibition at the Gaz Palace of Culture that lasted for four days. Eighty-eight artists exhibited at the Nevsky Palace of Culture, the largest exhibition of unofficial artists ever, lasting for ten days. Despite official approval, agents of the cultural ministry observed and photographed the visitors and the artists participating in the exhibitions. Such "observers" are humorously referred to as "art critics dressed in state uniforms" (*iskusstvovedy v shtatskom*), but their presence outside the exhibit halls was no laughing matter.

Once the furor over the "Bulldozer Exhibition" abated, the KGB and the police again applied pressure on unofficial artists. A leading Leningrad artist Evgeny Rukhin, one of the chief organizers of the Moscow exhibition, died under questionable circumstances in 1976. While Rukhin's death shocked and frightened Leningrad's artistic community, it nevertheless further galvanized the movement. Equally determined to live and work as if they were free to do so, the younger generation that had appeared



resumed the apartment exhibitions together with the older generation.

From November 14 through 17, 1981, in an apartment vacated for major renovations, one of the largest exhibitions of Leningrad's unofficial art was held at #1/3 on Bronnitskaya Street. Collectively, the sixty-one featured artworks represented the breadth of creative diversity that formed the soul of the second culture in Leningrad. Though it occurred at the beginning of the last decade before the demise of the Soviet Union, in a very real sense "*Bronnitskaya*" was the culmination of the apartment exhibitions in Leningrad that began in 1964. Although city officials periodically permitted group exhibitions of unofficial artists afterwards, battles over censorship continued until the late 1980s. Including many works from the *Bronnitskaya* exhibition, *The Space of Freedom: the Apartment Exhibitions in Leningrad, 1964-1986* is dedicated to the twenty-fifth anniversary of this historical moment in Russian art. ■

#### ENDNOTES

1. Yury Novikov a.k.a. R. Skif, "An Article for the Catalogue on the Exhibition at Bronnitskaya" in *On the Twentieth Anniversary of the Apartment Exhibition 'On Bronnitskaya Street'* (St. Petersburg: Museum of Nonconformist Art, 2001) 7.
2. Tatiana Shekhter, "Neofitsial'noe iskusstvo Peterburga: Ocherki istorii" from the Archives of the Museum of Nonconformist Art, St. Petersburg, (author's translations) 2.
3. Unofficial art was exhibited only rarely in apartments that were not communal. Initially, the apartment exhibitions were held at private apartments of *refusniks*, who felt they had nothing else to lose.
4. Boris Groys, *Commentaries on Art* (Izdatel'stvo "Khudozhestvennyj Zhurnal" 2003) 313-323
5. Novikov, 10.
6. Mikhail N. Epstein, *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture* (The University of Massachusetts Press: Amherst, 1995) 288.
7. Tatiana Shekhter, 1.
8. Shekhter, 4.
9. Shekhter, 2-3.
10. D.B. Sarabyanov, "K svoeobrazyu zhivopisi russkogo avangarda

nachala xx veka: Tezisy," *Sovetskoe iskusstvoznanie: iskusstvo xx ogo veka* (Moskva "Sovetskiy xudozhnik" 1989) 100-101.

11. Iurii V. Linnik, *Katalog vystavki proizvedenii gruppy "Amaravella" iz kolleksii Y.V. Linnika*, (Petrozavodsk: "Kareliya" 1989) 1-2. Linnik, a prolific writer and professor of philosophy at the University of Petro-Zavodsk, holds the largest and most complete collection of the works by this group of artists. Practically every inch of every wall in his fairly large apartment is covered with these extraordinary paintings.

12. The archive at the Museum of Nonconformist Art in St. Petersburg has an extensive collection of such *samizdat* primary materials on Leningrad's unofficial art. Many in the city have their own private collections as well. For example, Sergei Kovalsky, the president and one of the founders of Pushkin-10 Art Centre and of the "Brotherhood of Free Culture" and other earlier organizations of artists in St. Petersburg has three large volumes: "Galleriya I", "Galleriya II" and "Dokument", in which he has gathered meticulously prepared *samizdat* materials that chronicle the development of unofficial art in Leningrad. The volumes include details and photographs of the apartment exhibitions; articles and responses to the exhibitions and the works exhibited; articles on artists; correspondence with Soviet cultural officials; excerpts from the Soviet press, and much more.

13. Alek V. Rapoport, *Nonconformizm ostayotsya* (SPb: Izdatel'stvo DEAN 2003) 28.

14. Rapoport, 28.

15. Shekhter, 15.

#### SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Basin, A. and Skobkina, L., *Gazonevshchina*. Sankt-Peterburg: OOO "P.R.P." 2004, vtoroe izdanie.

Novikov, T., *Neofitsial'noe iskusstvo Leningrada*, unfinished manuscript from archives of the Museum of Nonconformist Art in St. Petersburg.

\_\_\_\_\_, *Dvadsat' let kvartirnoi vystavke 'Na Bronnitskoi'*. Sankt-Peterburg: Muzei nonkonformistskogo iskusstva, 2001.

Kushnir, I., *Avangard na Neve*. Sankt-Peterburg: OOO "PRP". (A continuing series of publications on nonconformist art in Leningrad)

Rapoport, A., *Nonconformizm ostayotsya*. Sankt-Peterburg: Izdatel'stvo DEAN, 2003.

Roberts, Norma, ed., *Quest for Self-Expression: Painting in Moscow and Leningrad, 1965-1990*. Columbus: Columbus Museum of Art, 1990.

Rosenfield, Alla and Norton T. Dodge, eds., *From Gulag to Glasnost: Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1995.

Shekhter, Tatiana, "Neofitsial'noe iskusstvo Peterburga (Leningrada): ocherki istorii," *Iz arkhiva Muzeya nonkonformistskogo iskusstva v Sankt-Peterburge*.

*Samizdat journals:*

*Arkhiv. 37, Chasy*, sold to private collectors in the early 1990's when the boom in Russian and Soviet art was at its peak.